A note on de Anima 413a 8-9

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His notorious sentence has given difficulty to most of the commentators on Aristotle, from Alexander to the present day.

Chapter B1 deals with Aristotle's general definition of ψυχή as ἐντελέχεια ἡ πρῶτη σώματος φυσικοῦ ὀργανικοῦ. The first part of the chapter leads up to this definition, which is given at 412b4. Aristotle then introduces two analogies designed to illustrate the meaning of the definition, first the axeity of an axe and second the sight of an eye. These show the essential unity of the object and its ἐντελέχεια; ψυχή is the ἐντελέχεια of the body in the same way that the faculty of cutting and the faculty of sight are the ἐντελέχεια of axes and eyes respectively. These analogies are used to illustrate two points: (i) the distinction between first and second ἐντελέχεια (i.e. between the power of sight and the actual exercise of it, or between life and waking life), and (ii) the inseparability of the ἐντελέχεια and the material object whose ἐντελέχεια it is. This latter point is then expanded, with the qualification that in the case of the ψυχή certain parts of it (supposing it to be divisible into parts) may well be separable in spite of this, if they are not the ἐντελέχεια of any specific part of the body. (This suggestion has already been touched upon at A 1, 403a 3 ff.; the present suggestion is more definite, and looks forward to the still more explicit discussion in F5). Then follows the comparison with the sailor and his boat, and the chapter comes to an end.

On the face of it this last illustration is completely at variance with the ἐντελέχεια doctrine; obviously the sailor's relation to his boat is entirely different from the relation of axeity to the axe or of sight to the eye. The ἐντελέχεια doctrine stresses the essential unity and inseparability of soul and body, while the sailor/boat analogy suggests a relation that is (a) terminable at will by one party and (b) much more like Nuyens' "instrumentisme mécaniste", i.e. a ghost-in-the-machine dualism in which the soul inhabits the body and controls it, acting upon it as an efficient cause. Coming at the end of this chapter the comparison brings the reader up with a start; as Hicks

remarks, any one who had carefully followed the course of the previous argument would expect to hear that the soul is not related to the body as a sailor to his boat.

Then why does Aristotle introduce the comparison at this point? Most commentators have thought that in doing so he is still thinking of the problem of separability, and that what he has in mind is the fact that the sailor can leave his boat at will; he has just remarked that certain parts of the soul may be separable because they are not associated with particular parts of the body, and it would be natural to go on to consider whether this may be true of the whole soul.³

There are two objections to this interpretation. (i) The syntactical structure of a 4-9 is against it.³ The passage runs:

(1) ὅτι μὲν οὖν οὐκ ἔστιν ἡ ψυχὴ χωριστὴ τοῦ σώματος, ἡ μέρη τινὰ αὐτῆς, εἰ μεριστῇ πέρωκεν, οὐκ ἄδηλον· ἐνίων γὰρ ἡ ἐντελεχεία τὸν μερὸν ἔστιν αὐτὸν. (2) οὐ μὲν ἀλλ᾽ ἐνιαύτεις ἔστιν οὐδὲν κωλύει, διὰ τὸ μηθὲν ὅσι εἰναι σώματος ἐντελεχείας. (3) ἔτι δὲ ἄδηλον εἰ οὕτως ἐντελεχεία τοῦ σώματος ἡ ψυχὴ ὄσπερ πλωτὴρ πλοῖον.

If the sequence of thought in (2) and (3) is “Certain parts of the ψυχὴ may be separable, and indeed this may be true of the whole ψυχὴ (as it is of a sailor)”, there must be a close connexion between the two sentences. But this is not the case. (3) answers to (1), not to (2), (ὅτι μὲν οὖν...οὐκ ἄδηλον...ἔτι δὲ ἄδηλον...), so that (2) must be parenthetical. There is thus no connexion between (2) and (3), and therefore no reason to assume that separability, the subject of (2), is still the subject of (3); the latter may well be introducing a new point.

(ii) In the context this sequence of thought makes no sense at all. Aristotle has been at pains to show that the essence of the ἐντελεχεία doctrine is that the soul as a whole is not separable from the body, and the suggestion that some parts of it may after all be separable was added only as an afterthought, as a possible exception to this general rule. Aristotle could hardly be so illogical as to proceed immediately to consider whether the general rule just established by his new doctrine is wrong. This would amount to saying “The ψυχὴ as a whole is not separable from the body, but certain parts of it may be so, and perhaps all parts of it are so”, which is patent nonsense. To avoid this difficulty some commentators have thought that in the comparison with the sailor Aristotle is referring only to the νοῦς.⁴

³ Cf. Hicks, p. 319 / in.
⁴ I owe this point to Mr F. H. Sandbach.
⁴ So Themistius and Philoponus.

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